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WORLD

U.S. Probes Web of Businesses for Ties to Alleged Hezbollah Supporters

Report points to a broad network of associates tied to the Amhaz brothers potentially operating in violation of U.S. sanctions



A Hezbollah fighter in Assal al-Ward, Syria, in 2015. The U.S. is scrutinizing individuals and companies for possible ties to supporters of the terrorist group. PHOTO: BASSEM MROUE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Ian Talley in Washington, Nazih Osseiran in Beirut and Asa Fitch in Dubai

July 27, 2018

U.S. intelligence officials are probing a transcontinental network of real-estate, weapons and electronic firms for ties to two Lebanese men blacklisted for their alleged support of terrorist group Hezbollah, according to people familiar with the matter.

The U.S. Treasury probe of the Lebanon-based network comes as the Trump administration ramps up pressure against Iran and its proxies like Hezbollah.

Under scrutiny are individuals and companies tied to two men sanctioned in 2014 for purchasing sophisticated electronics for Hezbollah to develop military drones. The Obama administration accused the two Lebanese brothers, Kamel Mohamed Amhaz and Issam Mohamed Amhaz, of using Stars Group Holding company of Lebanon and its subsidiaries to buy drone technology.

Public and private documents gathered by a nonprofit advising the U.S. on national security threats point to a broad web of associates tied to the Amhaz network, potentially operating in violation of U.S. sanctions.

Washington-based C4ADS, the nonprofit, documented the broader Amhaz-linked network in a report last month, mapping out connections through corporate registries, real-estate records

and other documents.



Kamel Amhaz attending an auction in Beirut in 2008. PHOTO: AP

The report is being reviewed by Treasury officials and other national-security officials, according to people familiar with the matter, raising the possibility of additional sanctions and other legal action against the network.

Previous reports by C4ADS, whose board and staff include several former U.S. national security officials, have been followed by U.S. action. For

example, the group detailed in 2016 how Chinese conglomerate Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Co. was likely aiding North Korea's nuclear program. Three months later, the U.S. sanctioned the company.

Asked about the case, a Treasury official said the department "does not telegraph sanctions or prospective actions, and does not comment on investigations."

The latest C4ADS report zeroes in on five individuals, Mohammad Al Barghouthy, of the United Arab Emirates; Ali Abu Adas, of Jordan; and three Lebanese men, Achraf Assem Safieddine, Hussein Fahd Rahal and Jihad Hussein El Anan. It estimates their collective real-estate assets are worth more than \$100 million.

"There is compelling evidence the wider Amhaz network had the infrastructure to move substantial amounts of money, as well as market access to small electronics and arms procurement, while also maintaining a significant property and commercial footprint," said C4ADS. "Individual partners are also connected to a potential Hezbollah operation, as well as corruption schemes in Liberia and money laundering activity in Lebanon and possibly the U.S.," the group said.

C4ADS noted its report doesn't definitively determine illicit activity, but rather shows "how sanctioned entities and individuals may be able to use corporate and real estate-related obfuscation to evade and adapt to sanctions."

According to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal, Mssrs. Abu Adas and Barghouthy are founders and longtime owners of Amhaz companies sanctioned in 2014. Mr. Barghouthy was the majority shareholder of a sanctioned subsidiary of the Stars Group, Dubai-based Unique Stars Mobile Phones LLC, until at least late 2017. Official Lebanese documents also list both men as founders and directors of Fast Link SAL, another sanctioned firm whose name was changed earlier this year.

While the U.S. Treasury won't comment on the case, department officials say engaging with blacklisted entities is a violation of U.S. law that can incur sanctions and enforcement action.

Mr. Abu Adas, in an interview from Lebanon, denied partnering with the Amhaz brothers or Hezbollah. Responding to allegations in the C4ADS report, he provided copies of official Lebanese documents stating neither he nor Mr. Barghouthy were shareholders in two companies with names similar to the sanctioned firms. Another letter he provided from an international accounting firm said a separate Dubai-based business Mr. Abu Adas owns had no shareholding in the sanctioned Lebanese companies.

C4ADS said it didn't make any of the claims Mr. Abu Adas disputed with the documents.

An executive at Mr. Abu Adas's Dubai-based mobile-phone distributor, Fast Telecom, said Kamel Amhaz had been a customer when Mr. Amhaz had a company in Dubai several years ago and might have created false links between his Lebanese business and Fast Telecom to make his business appear more legitimate.

Repeated attempts to reach Messrs. Amhaz and Barghouthy directly and through their companies were unsuccessful.

Corporate records at Lebanon's Justice Ministry show the three Lebanese men C4ADS connected to the Amhaz brothers—Messrs. Safieddine, Anan and Rahal—have been involved in firms founded or run by the blacklisted men, including an arms-importing company. Corporate records in April for another Lebanese firm, Liban Stars SAL, for example, listed Messrs. Safieddine and Anan as the primary owners alongside Kamel Amhaz. More recent corporate records say the company is “under dissolution.”

In interviews, the three men said they had never sold arms to Hezbollah or supported the group.

“It's stupid to think that there is a company in Lebanon importing weapons and selling them to Hezbollah,” Mr. Safieddine, listed in the corporate records as co-founder of one of the companies sanctioned in 2014, said in an interview from Lebanon. “We did not do it,” he said, adding that the partners disassociated the weapons firm from Kamel Amhaz in 2014 and closed it in 2015. Mr. Safieddine said he was never a shareholder in any of the firms associated with Kamel Amhaz and resigned as his legal adviser after Mr. Amhaz was sanctioned.

Mr. Safieddine also owns U.S. real estate. Mr. Safieddine, along with a man named Bill Jamal—who is registered in state records as managing several companies linked to the Lebanese businessman—is associated with more than 30 U.S. property deals.

“He is a wonderful human being and he pays his taxes year after year,” Mr. Jamal said of Mr. Safieddine.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Corporate records at Lebanon's Justice Ministry identify Achraf Assem Safieddine as the co-founder of one company sanctioned in 2014. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said Mr. Safieddine co-founded two of the companies sanctioned in 2014, and the article didn't specify that the corporate records were from Lebanon's Justice Ministry. Also, April 2018 corporate records for another Lebanese firm associated with Kamel Amhaz, Liban Stars SAL, which wasn't sanctioned, listed Mr. Safieddine as a primary owner, and later corporate records said that company is “under dissolution.” The article omitted the date of the records that listed Mr. Safieddine as a primary owner and omitted that it is listed as under dissolution. A graphic with the earlier article said that Mr. Safieddine and others play a role in Amhaz and other companies, including cellphones, a weapons seller and an oil firm. Although corporate records listed Mr. Safieddine as a primary owner of Liban Stars, he said that he was never a shareholder in any of the companies associated with Kamel Amhaz and that he resigned as Mr. Amhaz's legal adviser after Mr. Amhaz was sanctioned. The article omitted this information. Mr. Safieddine also said that he and partners in another concern, an unsanctioned weapons company that closed in 2015, disassociated it from Kamel Amhaz in 2014. The article didn't mention Mr. Safieddine's statement that Mr. Amhaz separated from that company in 2014. (Oct. 25, 2018)

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